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Distortions of a Campaign

There now appears to be little reason to believe that President John F. Kennedy was giving away a secret imparted to him by the Eisenhower administration when he made his 1960 campaign statement advocating U. S. aid to anti-Castro revolutionaries.

Former Vice-President Richard Nixon in his book, "Six Crises", has said he thought that Kennedy was knowingly "jeopardizing the security of a United States foreign policy operation"—the pending invasion of Cuba.

Most persons will accept the statement of the man who briefed Kennedy for the administration on national security intelligence matters. He is Allen W. Dulles, who was head of the Central Intelligence Agency at the time. Dulles says he did not tell Kennedy what the United States was secretly planning and doing in those pre-election briefings. This statement, which allies with Kennedy's denials, comes from a source which has nothing to gain by clearing the president.

Nixon's book explains why he thought Kennedy had been told about the Cuban invasion plans. When Nixon heard of the Kennedy campaign statement he asked Fred Seaton, secretary of interior, to call the White House and confirm that Kennedy had been briefed specifically on those plans. "Seaton reported back to me in half an hour," the book says. "His answer: Kennedy had been briefed on this operation."

In view of the Dulles and Kennedy statements now, this reply by Seaton would appear to have been an error.

The misunderstanding about the briefing is easier to understand than the action which Nixon took after he learned that Kennedy had advocated more aid to the anti-Castro forces.

"Kennedy had me at a terrible disadvantage," Nixon writes. He felt that through use of confidential information Kennedy was casting aspersions on the support of those who wanted to take a tougher

line against Castro, a line which the administration was already taking "covertly" with the encouragement of Nixon.

Nixon, facing the fourth of the television debates, said he had only two courses. One was to say that what Kennedy said should be done was being done with Nixon's support, a course that would have revealed the invasion secret. Nixon said he took the only other possible course. In the television debate he attacked the Kennedy recommendation as "dangerously irresponsible", said it would lose our friends in Latin America, might bring United Nations condemnation and might be an invitation to Khrushchev to involve us in a brush-fire war in Latin America.

This is a frank admission by Nixon that he was not being truthful with the voters. They have a feeling, possibly naive, that campaigns are to inform them rather than misinform them.

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The possible courses Nixon described may have seemed to be the only ones he could take without losing some votes, but they were not the only ones he could have taken. He ended his television statement by repeating his own recommendation for a quarantine of Cuba. He could have made that his only answer. Even if he had agreed with Kennedy on the need for support of anti-Castro forces, it is doubtful that that alone would have given away the secret that the U. S. was helping launch an invasion.

What Nixon did instead was to condemn as dangerous and irresponsible a course of action which Nixon himself says he had been supporting.

Hard decisions must be made quickly in the course of presidential campaigns. No one envies the man who has to make them. Some of them inevitably will be wrong. The strange thing is that in retrospect the fact that he misled the public does not seem to bother Nixon.